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SUBJECT: CHILE'S NATIONAL PARKS LACK INFRASTRUCTURE, AMERICAN HELPS RESTORE ENVIRONMENT

**¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY:** The Ambassador recently met with Chile's National Tourism Service (SERNATUR) and National Forestry Commission (CONAF) to provide feedback on his January trip to Chilean Patagonia. He inquired about resources for improving the infrastructure in Torres del Paine National Park, one of Chile's largest and most famous tourist attractions. The meetings were arranged in response to a specific request from the Director of Torres del Paine. Both agencies were sympathetic and concerned about the lack of resources for park infrastructure throughout Chile. They also lauded efforts by Americans Doug and Kris Tompkins, to protect and restore sensitive areas in Patagonia. End summary.

BACKGROUND: Ambassador Visits Chile's Patagonia

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**¶12. (SBU)** During the Ambassador's late January visit to Torres del Paine National Park, the park rangers demonstrated improved English, there were new information brochures, and the park staff exhibited a professionalism exemplified during the coordinated rescue of an injured Canadian hiker. However, the park's facilities and infrastructure were in poor condition. The Ambassador reconnected with the park's director, Jose Linnebrink, who emphasized the lack of resources for park infrastructure and requested that the Ambassador raise the topic with appropriate officials in Santiago.

**¶13. (SBU)** The Ambassador also visited U.S. environmentalist couple, Doug Tompkins and Kris McDivitt Tompkins. Tompkins founded The North Face and Esprit and his wife is the former CEO of the clothing company Patagonia. The couple hosted the Ambassador at Valle Chacabuco, near Cochran. They own significant tracts of land at both Pumalin (near Chaiten volcano and currently inaccessible to the public) and Chacabuco. The Tompkins are working to turn over-grazed land into parks by restoring the natural environment and investing significantly in the infrastructure. They plan to turn the land back over to Chile, but feel the National Park system is currently incapable of protecting and maintaining the areas, in part because of insufficient resources. End background.

SERNATUR: SERNATUR Confirms Resources Needed

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**¶14. (SBU)** The Ambassador followed his trip with a February 9 meeting with Oscar Santelices, Director of SERNATUR; accompanied by ESTHoff and EPoloff. The Ambassador drew a contrast between the prominent role Torres del Paine plays in attracting tourists and its inadequate infrastructure. Santelices explained SERNATUR is under the Ministry of Interior while CONAF is under the Ministry of Agriculture, making them subject to different laws. He stressed the lack of resources was due in part to legal reasons -- by law, park fees collected must be pooled and distributed among all parks.

**¶15. (SBU)** Santelices noted that CONAF has historically leaned towards conservation over tourism. He commented that there are efforts underway to improve parks, including an on-going project with the

World Bank to develop a legal framework to protect wildlife areas. He opined that there should be more World Bank projects and public-private protected areas, as well as better branding of Chile's natural wonders and a greater focus on ecotourism.

¶6. (SBU) SERNATUR's Director complained that poor upkeep of parks, especially Torres del Paine, will harm Chile in the long-run. He noted pending legislation to designate specific areas in the country as having special touristic interest could allow SERNATUR to introduce a standardized rating system to help promote increased tourism. When the Ambassador mentioned that he had met the Tompkins, Santelices agreed that the Tompkins' parks are impressive.

Santelices derided those Chileans who dislike the Tompkins, claiming they were "ignorant" and they fail to recognize the important role of private citizens in conservation.

CONAF Sees Plight of Parks, U.S. Cooperation

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¶7. (SBU) On February 20, the Ambassador, accompanied by ESTHoff, met with Acting CONAF Director Luis Duchens and Claudio Cunazza, Head of the Protected Areas and Environment. Duchens and Cunazza were sympathetic to the financial situation of the parks. They confirmed that by law park fees must be pooled and used to support all parks, including those that receive less tourism. Cunazza said there are insufficient resources to improve public facilities in many areas of Chile that receive few visitors.

¶8. (SBU) The Ambassador described Torres del Paine staff's dedication in coordinating the rescue of a Canadian hiker. Duchens noted that increasing numbers of visitors to Chile's parks are resulting in more congestion and accidents. He voiced concerns not

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only about resources and facilities, but also about a lack of communication systems. Despite some improvements, including better general park information on the internet, communication is still a problem, especially in an emergency.

¶9. (SBU) Cunazza was worried about the zone between the steppes and the forest, including areas that support the guanaco. He lauded the Tompkins' efforts to restore the grazing areas of the guanaco. [Note: Guanaco are native to the arid, mountainous regions of South America. They are related to camels and are similar in appearance to llamas. In Chile, they face competition from livestock. End note.]

¶10. (U) Turning to U.S.-Chile cooperation, Cunazza cited the parks meeting hosted in Washington, D.C. in November 2008, which generated consensus on areas of potential engagement under the Environmental Cooperation Agreement work plan. Meeting participants also expressed optimism about U.S.-Chile cooperation on conservation and forestry, but bemoaned the dearth of resources to support many of the proposed projects. Cunazza was pleased, however, that the U.S. Forestry Service is offering CONAF one scholarship to attend the Spanish-language "Wildlands and Protected Area Management" seminar, July 7 - August 9 in Colorado. He said CONAF would identify a candidate and promised to follow-up with the Embassy.

COMMENT: Chile's Parks Valued, But Underfunded

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¶11. (SBU) Chile is still working to improve its ecotourism in order to increase the flow of money it generates. There is no doubt Torres del Paine is the jewel in the crown of Chile's stunning and unique National Parks system, as well as a major source of income. However, the current mechanisms for public funding are inadequate. The number of visitors to Torres del Paine increased from about 20,000 in 1990 to more than 128,000 in 2007. During high season entrance fees are 15,000 pesos (US\$25-30 depending on the exchange rate) for foreigners and 5,000 pesos for Chileans (US\$8-10). However, the fees do not go directly to the park. In fact, lack of adequate infrastructure means more visitors put more pressure on the natural environment. Even if some of the Chilean public does not support the Tompkins' endeavors, it is clear that the relevant authorities recognize the value in preserving wilderness, whether

it's through public or private ownership.

SIMONS